

DRESSING UP THE NAKED TRUTH

BY ANNETTE SIMMONS

ASK Magazine is not alone when it comes to using storytelling to capture lessons learned and share knowledge. Several other practitioners have successfully introduced this approach to knowledge management within organizations. This article by Annette Simmons marks the first in a series by authors whose work on storytelling has been widely recognized. We hope these features illuminate why ASK contributors use the story form to share their knowledge, and how you can do the same. Annette Simmons spoke at the February 2002 APPL Masters Forum.

I WENT TO MY FIRST STORYTELLING FESTIVAL AS AN ADULT. MY DAD THOUGHT IT WOULD BE A GREAT PLACE FOR THE family to get together, so he sent us all tickets. I can still recall sitting inside the festival tent and noticing the rapt attention of the people around me as a story was told. Jaws slackened, whole bodies became receptive. We were trained on every single word that came out of the storyteller. That's when I understood the power of storytelling.

I first began to study storytelling so that my presentations wouldn't be boring—but as I worked on storytelling, storytelling started to work on me. There's something important going on here, I realized. But how do I describe it? With a story, of course.

Truth, naked and cold, had been turned away from every door in the village. Her nakedness frightened the people. When Parable found her she was huddled in a corner, shivering and hungry. Taking pity on her, Parable gathered her up and took her home. There, she dressed Truth in story, warmed her and sent her out again. Clothed in story, Truth knocked again at the doors and was readily welcomed into the villagers' houses. They invited her to eat at their tables and warm herself by their fires.

—*Jewish Teaching Story*

We need stories because cognitive learning doesn't always cut it. If it did, any of us who wanted to lose weight would only need to read one diet book. People don't have flip-top heads that open up for you to shove information down. We've tried that—at least I have. My first ten years in management experience I worked that way. It doesn't work.

Story is one of the most respectful ways to share knowledge, and thus, one of the most effective because it allows people to come to their own conclusions. Instead of telling someone, "You should be more patient," you invite your listener to come to that conclusion independently: "Hey, I know what the problem is. My impatience is making things worse."

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And who amongst us doesn't need more patience? Yet, preach "Be more patient, be more patient," to a bunch of smart executives, and I'll guarantee increased patience will not be the first change you begin to notice in their behavior.

So take them on a journey, instead. Here's another story:

A woman begged the shaman for a potion to make her husband love her again. She explained that before her husband fought in the war, he was warm, loving, and he laughed easily. But since his return he was angry, distant, and humorless. The more she tried to hug her husband, tease him, and draw him back to her, the worse it became. The shaman was her last hope. He listened patiently to the woman's story. When she was finished, he said, "I think I can help you. I will make you a love potion—but you must go find one of the ingredients." She said she would. Then he told her to get a whisker from a live lion. She was distraught, "How can I possibly get a whisker from a beast as fierce and powerful as a lion?" The shaman shrugged and left her to her tears.

The next day she went to a place where she had once seen a lion. On that day she saw nothing more

than monkeys fighting in the trees and birds flying in the air. On the second day, she stayed a little longer and found a comfortable place to sit. But she did not see the lion. Weeks passed. One morning she sensed the lion's presence before she saw him. She didn't move but the lion saw her anyway and ran away. It was a week before she saw him again. Curious, the lion stopped running away. Finally, after weeks of bringing the lion good things to eat and ever so slowly reaching out to pet him, he finally was so comfortable with the woman that he fell asleep under her stroking hand. Once he was asleep she took a very sharp knife and gently cut one single whisker from the lion's muzzle.

The next day she brought this whisker to the shaman, and asked for the potion that would make her husband love her again. The shaman said "You do not need any potion. Throw away the whisker, keep the knowledge you have gained, and your husband will learn to love you once more."

—*Somali tale from Ethiopia*

Now, that's what I would call a teaching story. So if you're trying to teach someone how to be a good project manager, handing out a list of dos-and-don'ts will never encompass the subject the same way as one of your personal stories about when you learned something about project management. •



ANNETTE SIMMONS is the President of Group Process Consulting and the author of three books, *The Story Factor* (2001), *A Safe Place for Dangerous Truth: Using Dialogue to Overcome Fear & Distrust* (1999) and *Territorial Games: Understanding and Ending Turf Wars at Work* (1997). Her books have been translated into several languages, and she travels regularly around the world to speak about her work, much of it concerning the use of storytelling in organizations.

"Whether you're proposing a risky new venture, trying to close a deal, or leading a charge against injustice, you have a story to tell," says Simmons. "Tell your story well and you will create a shared experience with your listeners that can have profound and lasting results."

Simmons combines public speaking, writing, consulting and constant research and development to serve organizations seeking to increase workgroup cooperation for bottom-line results. Her latest book on women in organizations is scheduled to be released later this year.

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